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SUBJECT: (C/NF) NIGERIA: ATIKU SEEKS COMEBACK, REBUFFS IBB

REF: A. ABUJA 763

- [1](#)B. ABUJA 457
- [1](#)C. ABUJA 473
- [1](#)D. ABUJA 456
- [1](#)E. LAGOS 153

Classified By: Pol/C Walter Pflaumer, reasons 1.4 (b, c & d).

[1](#)1. (C//NF) SUMMARY: After losing his April 2007 presidential bid, and the subsequent election tribunal case against President Yar'Adua (though this is still being appealed), former Vice President and Action Congress (AC) candidate Atiku Abubakar seeks to regain a place in national politics. In an April 22 conversation with PolOff, Umar Pariya (strictly protect), Atiku's aide-de-camp, asserted that Atiku is leveraging his influence to stage a political comeback, with an eye to 2011. Pariya said that Atiku continues to rebuff Yar'Adua's entreaties to withdraw his appeal to the Supreme Court and to rejoin the People's Democratic Party (PDP) since doing so would, essentially, jeopardize his own political ambitions. Atiku remains hopeful the Supreme Court will give an honest, fair hearing to his appeal, and quash Yar'Adua's election. Pariya said that in preparation for new elections, Atiku and fellow opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari are discussing a power-sharing agreement. In addition, Pariya said Atiku's unwillingness to agree to Yar'Adua's call to return to the PDP was directly linked to former President Obasanjo remaining the PDP's Board of Trustees (BOT) Chair. Atiku believes Yar'Adua's unwillingness to challenge Obasanjo over his "undemocratic" stewardship of the PDP results from Yar'Adua's continued political isolation and weakness. Pariya suggested that while Obasanjo had relinquished formal control of the government to Yar'Adua, he retained control of the PDP through the BOT. Some disaffected PDP members, Pariya claimed, are increasingly frustrated by Obasanjo's continuing political role, and have already pledged support for Atiku. It is not only AC members but also these disaffected members of the PDP that Atiku is seeking to draw into his plans, including the formation of a new political party. Atiku is currently campaigning in his home state of Adamawa ahead of the April 26 gubernatorial polls, hoping to ensure an AC victory, which would illustrate his continuing political relevance, Pariya said.

[1](#)2. (C//NF) SUMMARY CONT'D: Moreover, Pariya also described efforts by former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida to reach

out to Atiku to acquire his backing for his own political return. Pariya averred that Babangida considered Atiku a logical ally, given that both are avowed Obasanjo foes. According to Pariya however, Atiku has repudiated the idea of joining forces with Babangida, distrusting his loyalty and intentions. Pariya confided that, in part to support his own comeback, Babangida is bribing appeals court justices to overturn Senate President David Mark's election; Pariya said Babangida has already successfully bribed the justices who upheld son-in-law Mahmud Shinkafi's election. In addition, Pariya intimated that Yar'Adua told Atiku April 22 that he would return to Nigeria "when the doctors deemed appropriate," suggesting that his medevac to Germany appeared more serious than official GON statements claim. END SUMMARY.

13. (C//NF) Umar Pariya (strictly protect), confidant of Action Congress (AC) presidential aspirant and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar spoke with PolOff April 22. Pariya told PolOff that Atiku considers himself a relevant, important political figure in Nigeria, despite both his ouster from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and his loss at the Presidential Election Tribunal, and is leveraging his influence to stage a political comeback with an eye to the 2011 presidential elections. Pariya said that, with the exception of former President Obasanjo, Atiku remains in close contact and constructively engaged with Nigeria's political elite, including President Yar'Adua and former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida. (Pariya intimated that Atiku phoned Yar'Adua in Germany April 22, to inquire about the state of his health and wish him well, as is culturally expected. The President reportedly thanked Atiku for calling him and assured him that he would return to Nigeria "when the doctors deemed appropriate," but added that he was "not doing so well." Yar'Adua reportedly said that after he "recovered," he would return to Nigeria, around April 26, see Ref A.)

14. (C//NF) As reported (Ref B), Atiku rebuffed President Yar'Adua's entreaties to reconsider an appeal to the Supreme Court and rejoin the PDP (Atiku filed an appeal March 14). Were he to withdraw his case, Pariya reasoned, Atiku would risk "losing face" with his supporters, thereby jeopardizing his political aspirations, including his desire to become Nigeria's president. Pariya intimated that Atiku remains hopeful that the Supreme Court will overturn Yar'Adua's election, and is emboldened by what Atiku perceives as evidence from other rulings that the judiciary is being "fair and independent." Pariya told PolOff that Atiku and fellow opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari (All Nigeria People's Party, ANPP) have been discussing a power-sharing agreement in the event Yar'Adua's election is quashed and new elections are announced. (Note: In conversations in late March with PolOff, Buhari confirmed the talks but appeared less than sanguine that the Supreme Court would overturn the elections. Atiku and Buhari had attempted to work together in the lead up to the April 2007 presidential elections, but ultimately disagreed on the fundamentals of any ANPP-AC alliance. With the by-elections in Kogi and Adamawa however, where the AC and ANPP have vowed to work together to ensure the PDP does not return to power, new signs may be emerging that an alliance is possible. It remains far from certain, of course, whether Buhari and Atiku can sublimate their own divergent ambitions for the presidency in the interests of a two-party alliance, aimed at toppling the PDP. End Note.)

15. (C//NF) At the same time, Pariya contended that Atiku's rejection of overtures to return to the PDP reflected Atiku's disdain for former President Obasanjo, and for the "undemocratic" manner in which Obasanjo had been administering the internal affairs of the party as BOT Chair. Pariya opined that the March 8 election of Vincent Ogbulafor as PDP National Chair demonstrated Obasanjo's "full" control of the party, and aggressively debunked claims that a cadre of governors had acted independently of either Yar'Adua or Obasanjo in selecting Ogbulafor (Comment: we question this interpretation of events, see Ref B. End Comment.) According to Pariya, Atiku contended that Obasanjo's desire to remain relevant within the PDP had not been effectively

quashed simply because his own candidate failed to secure the position of PDP National Chair, arguing that Ogbulafor was also an Obasanjo pick, and claiming that the individuals "elected" at the state and zonal level during the February PDP congresses had also been Obasanjo sympathizers. Furthermore, Pariya said that Atiku dismissed notions of a rift between Yar'Adua and Obasanjo. In reality, Pariya averred, Obasanjo had relinquished formal control of the government to Yar'Adua with the understanding that Obasanjo retained full control of the PDP. If Yar'Adua had indeed distanced himself from Obasanjo as Atiku had implored him to do (as a quid pro quo for Atiku's cooperation, see Ref B), Pariya questioned, "why would Atiku remain unwilling to rejoin the PDP?"

16. (C//NF) Moreover, Pariya reiterated that Atiku's unwillingness to concede to either of Yar'Adua's demands stemmed from Yar'Adua's political isolation and weakness, which Pariya said Atiku believed continued to leave Yar'Adua "beholden" to Obasanjo and incapable of challenging his authority over the PDP. With the PDP firmly within Obasanjo's grasp, Pariya deduced, Atiku appears ever more confident the host of anti-Obasanjo individuals within the PDP will defect to Atiku's camp, recognizing a greater degree of internal democracy and "opportunity" within the AC. Pariya also insisted that the AC remains the only meaningful opposition in Nigeria given that it is guided by "principles of democracy." (Note: When he met with PolCouns March 4, Atiku articulated a desire to form a new political party, which would unite members of the AC and disaffected PDP members. While Atiku declined to adumbrate the new party's constitution, ideology, or vision, he claimed it had already gained several adherents from the PDP. Atiku also said the party would be unveiled shortly before the Supreme Court renders its ruling, which Atiku expects as early as late May. End Note.)

17. (C//NF) Pariya noted that as Atiku awaits the Supreme Court's decision, Atiku is currently campaigning for the AC in his home area of Adamawa state ahead of the April 26 gubernatorial by-election. Given the importance of that election in measuring Atiku's continuing political influence, Pariya said Atiku had sought and secured assurances directly from President Yar'Adua that the PDP would not seek to rig the poll. While, according to Pariya, Yar'Adua had given similar guarantees to Atiku days before the March 29 Kogi by-election (in which the PDP won), Adamawa represented a "do-or-die affair" for Atiku. Without an AC victory in Adamawa, Pariya maintained, Atiku and the AC generally would lose standing in the country. If Atiku cannot even win his own state, Pariya remarked, people would wonder what relevance he had in national politics.

18. (C//NF) When asked about former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida, Pariya remarked that Babangida had called on Atiku several times since their meeting March 2 (when both Babangida and Atiku returned from extended stays abroad). Pariya opined that Babangida was reaching out to Atiku in order to "establish a relationship" with someone he contended had political clout. Pariya believed Babangida is "orchestrating" a political comeback, and consequently, is looking to the nation's "godfathers" (including Atiku) to construct a base of support. (Refs D & E also claim a tentative Babangida return.) Pariya said that Babangida considers Atiku a natural ally, since both he and Atiku are avowed Obasanjo foes. According to Pariya, however, Atiku distrusts Babangida, and refused categorically to cooperate with him.

19. (C//NF) In addition, Pariya said Babangida is doling out bribes to the justices of the Jos Court of Appeal to ensure it upholds the Benue State Election Tribunal decision to nullify Senate President David Mark's April 2007 election. (Note: Dr. Josiah Fearon (protect), Anglican Archbishop of the Kaduna Archdiocese and confidant of David Mark, also recently told PolOff that Babangida was seeking to bring Mark down because he had a score to settle with the Senator dating back to the days when the latter served as one of his

military "boys." Fearon also suggested that Babangida's antipathy toward Obasanjo, who is viewed widely as Mark's patron, is prompting the retaliation. End Note.) Pariya also claimed that the April 11 Kaduna Court of Appeal decision to uphold Zamfara governor Mahmud Shinkafi's election resulted from Babangida's bribing of the appeal court justices to secure a favorable verdict. (Comment: Babangida's daughter Aisha ) who had been married to late General Sani Abacha's son ) wedded Shinkafi in early April. The practice of cementing political allegiances between families by offering one's child in marriage is commonplace in northern Nigeria. President Yar'Adua, whose marriage to his own wife is a product of such an arrangement, wedded his daughters to northern politicians in part due to the prestige and access accorded public officeholders. End Comment.)

¶10. (C//NF) COMMENT: While it is difficult to assess the degree to which Atiku remains politically relevant in Nigeria, politics here remains the pastime of a select few whose wealth and connections determine the extent of their relevance. Parties also remain far less about ideologies or institutions than personalities. Atiku's network of supporters, while no doubt reduced by his distance from the current centers of power and Obasanjo's continuing efforts, could grow in coming months given the weakness of Yar'Adua and the disaffection of many PDP politicians toward Obasanjo. It also remains far from clear whether Atiku possesses (or can muster) the recognition and backing necessary to attain genuine influence on national politics. Atiku's repudiation of Babangida underscores not only a politically expedient calculation (given that Babangida is viewed as irrelevant by many), but also Atiku's confidence in his own ability to "compete" with the likes of Babangida (and Obasanjo).

¶11. (C//NF) COMMENT CONT'D: While rumors of an Obasanjo-Yar'Adua rift continue, indications to the contrary appear increasingly credible. While some have stated that Yar'Adua's electoral "win" at the Tribunal helped him gain the requisite legitimacy to jumpstart his presidency (by, among other things, severing the bonds of obligation he may have had to Obasanjo for placing him in office), Yar'Adua's aversion to indicting Obasanjo has led many to wonder if he is truly independent. At the same time, many prominent northerners (e.g., Balarabe Musa, former military governor of Kaduna state) are now arguing that Yar'Adua's continued inability to carry out reforms and, in essence, do the work of a president is undermining his popularity, even in the North. Musa, who harbors no admiration for Obasanjo, told PolOff April 24 that Yar'Adua may in fact be "worse" than Obasanjo, largely for this reason. END COMMENT.

¶12. (C//NF) BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Umar Pariya, who appears to be in his early 50s, claims to have been a close confidant of Atiku (now aged 62) since the latter entered government service as a customs official over twenty years ago. Predictably, Pariya believes Atiku exemplifies the principles of democracy and "desires only the best interest of the Nigerian people" as Atiku eyes the 2011 presidential elections. Pariya is not a neutral, dispassionate political observer, but he is intimately knowledgeable about Atiku (and Obasanjo), and his reporting of Atiku's views are likely accurate. Incidentally, though unrelated, Pariya told PolOff that Atiku recently purchased substantial share holdings in an Italian-based shipping company, which was awarded a GON contract worth \$10 million to operate in Lagos, suggesting that Atiku may yet have strong incentives to stay in Nigeria.

END NOTE.  
SANDERS